



## Second time a phoenix?

Discover Coventry's reinvention - the city that rose from the ashes

**Time:** 30mins

**Distance:** ½ mile

**Landscape:** urban

Heavily scarred during one of the Second World War's most infamous air raids, Coventry's rebuild as a modern city of the 1950's is a well-known tale. But in reality there is much more to this story.

This trail reveals that there were misgivings about the outdated medieval city centre long before the sirens first sounded and explores why it was rebuilt on breathtakingly 'modern' lines.

But over 60 years later have the 'shiny new' streets started to look a little tired? And has our modern love of shopping had as big an impact on the city's development as the blasts?

**Location:**

St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry

**Start:**

St Mary's Guildhall, Bayley Lane, Coventry, CV1 5RN

**Finish:**

Coventry Market, Coventry

**Grid reference:**

SP 33631 78880



## Route and stopping points



- 01 Coventry Guildhall
- 02 New cathedral forecourt
- 03 Broadgate, beside the statue of Lady Godiva
- 04 Lower Precinct, beside fountain
- 05 Coventry Market

## 01 Coventry Guildhall

Any ideas you had of Coventry being a completely modern city quickly subside as you take a look around this ancient spot.

In the Middle Ages Coventry was one of the largest and most important cities in England. From the foundation of a priory in 1043, by the 14th century it was the fourth largest city in England due to its burgeoning wool and cloth trades.

The growth of new industries in the 19th and 20th centuries - watches, sewing machines, cycles and then most spectacularly cars - led to phenomenal population growth.

Many of today's big cities were creations of this 19th century industrial boom. But where nearby Birmingham was a mere village before the industry came, Coventry's ancient history meant that it already had a well-established city centre.

However, narrow winding streets, outdated workshops and housing slums that grew as workers flooded in to labour in the new industries, quickly became unsuited to the demands of a growing city. The noise and smell of factories belching smoke and smog only made conditions worse for the people who lived there.

And so, in the 1930s, plans were made to rebuild the city centre to support a new way of life and provide good roads and modern buildings. Work on the new plans got underway, but by the outbreak of WWII Coventry city centre still had its medieval street pattern and many ancient buildings.

The catastrophic destruction caused by the air raids of November 1940 destroyed much of medieval Coventry overnight. In fact, the chief planner observed that the Luftwaffe had done the demolition work for him!

Despite the destruction of the bombings and subsequent redevelopment there are still glimpses of medieval Coventry peeking through the gaps today.

St Mary's Guildhall dates from 1340 and is widely considered to be one of the finest remaining medieval Guildhalls in the country. Civic meetings, banquets and theatrical events have all been hosted here over the centuries - it is even thought that Shakespeare himself performed within its walls!

The Guildhall extraordinarily survived the blitz that decimated much of the rest of Coventry, not least the cathedral whose crumpled remains quietly sit just next door. Its proud architecture and the narrow winding streets that surround it give us a clear idea of what has been lost. Take the opportunity to wander around and examine the nooks and crannies of the area up close- it will be your last view of anything old!

### Directions

Follow Bayley Lane along the side of the old cathedral towards University Square and stop at the entrance to the new cathedral.

## 02 Forecourt of the new cathedral

On the night of November 14th 1940, the Blitz hit Coventry. It lasted 33 hours and over 400 bombers attacked. The fires could be seen 100 miles away and the devastation was unprecedented.

Here, old and new Coventry stand face to face. The shell of the old cathedral sits in stark contrast to the very modern design of the new. This is a rare example in the city of a damaged building being retained - most were demolished and replaced with new structures. The remnants of the cathedral were kept as a symbol of the horror of war.

In Europe today old buildings are respected and preserved, indeed they are often prioritised over new development. That was not always so. The loss of old buildings in the city and across Britain after the war was not mourned as it would be now. In Coventry it was seen as an opportunity to sweep away the old, inefficient layout and crowded slums and replace them with modern buildings and purpose-built highways.

Coventry is one of Britain's best examples of this mid-century 'modernist' approach. But whilst this was happening in the UK, other cities across Europe tackled the post-war clean up very differently.

Poland's Warsaw is perhaps one of the most famous cities whose approach to reconstruction was in stark contrast to Coventry's. Using archival records and skilled craftsmen, much-loved buildings were painstakingly repaired and rebuilt. In former East Germany the centre of Dresden was slowly pieced-together to regain some of its former glory. This example is especially poignant in Coventry because the two cities are now twinned.

In contrast to these eastern European cities we cannot enjoy a stroll through a historic centre in Coventry today.

However, in creating a new cathedral there was an opportunity for new design. If you take a look inside today you will find a wonderful collection of art, craft and architecture from some of the leading designers of post-war Britain. Graham Sutherland's famous tapestry of Christ makes a profound impact as you walk along the nave, as just one example if you explore inside.

Whilst these are not as venerable as medieval streets and buildings, they tell a story of the destruction and reconstruction of the city.

#### Directions

From the cathedral carry on along St Michael's Avenue, passing the spire of Holy Trinity Church on your right. After this bear a little to your left, into Broadgate and stand by the statue of Lady Godiva.

### 03 Broadgate, beside the statue of Lady Godiva

The vast paved square in front of you is a great place to watch the world go by. Shoppers, commuters and families cross paths and weave their way through the very centre of the city. This is no accident. One of the aims of the post-war plan for the city was to create areas of open space, to overcome the tightly-packed feel of the old city.

Broadgate was an important focal point of this plan, with new 5 storey buildings forming a square and creating a welcome piece of open space. A new department store, shops, offices and a hotel enveloped this new public space.

Look for the red brick wall with a clock on the opposite side from the department store. This is a good example of the simple, undecorated style of brick buildings of the 1950s. It is often known as 'Festival of Britain' style as it was most famously used for the 1951 Festival on London's South Bank, of which the Royal Festival Hall is the sole surviving building.

Now, look below the clock at the lady on a white horse. This is Lady Godiva. She was a local noblewoman who, according to legend, rode naked through the city to protest at her husband's oppressive taxes. In solidarity, no one looked at her, except for one 'peeping Tom'. If you want a surprise, wait until the clock strikes the hour, and as the doors below open you will be witness to Lady Godiva and her very own peeping Tom!

Lady Godiva rode back into the limelight in the 1980s. The bronze statue of her that you can see in the centre of this square occupied an important place in Coventry's post-war plan. It was in the direct line of sight from the old cathedral spire through the square and onto to the new precinct we are about to visit. However, in the late 1980s the red brick Cathedral Lanes shopping centre was build right across this vista.

It might seems a strange decision to completely block the main viewpoint of the post-war plan, but the demand for more shops and the lack of other suitable sites took precedence in this era of the consumer. Once again, Coventry decided to move with the times rather than romanticise past design.

#### Directions

With your back to Cathedral Lanes shopping centre, walk to the right of the ramp into the shopping precinct and stop by the fountain.

## 04 Lower Precinct, beside fountain

Amidst the clean lines of box-like, red brick buildings, the ancient start to this trail seems like it could be a million miles away.

You are standing in the main part of the 1950s shopping centre - a pioneering design for the time. Straight pedestrianised streets were lined with shops of uniform design, focussing attention here at a central fountain. At the time, it was a radical decision to remove cars from the high street, changing shopping from a chore to a leisure experience in its own right.

But the centre has evolved over time. The Precinct was built with a second level of shops above the ground floor to provide more shopping space, but it didn't catch on because people didn't want to walk up the stairs to the first floor. It is only in recent years that the addition of escalators has made this space easily accessible.

By the 1980s open air shopping streets had become less popular and people flocked to covered shopping centres, which offered protection from the weather and a new experience. As a result the Cathedral Lanes shopping centre was built. If you look further into the Lower Precinct you can see that part of it has also been roofed over. This was done around the same time in a bid to update the area and compete with purpose-built centres.

However the fickle trends of consumer tastes ironically meant that this addition actually coincided with a revival of outdoor streets, as people started to dislike feeling totally enclosed in shopping centres! What do you think about the Precinct today?

Before you leave this stop, continue into the Lower Precinct to look at the circular café. This was another pioneering design for the 1950s, showing how modern technology was starting to create more interesting features. Built from concrete and glass the café gave visitors a unique, panoramic view. It also tells us that people were now beginning to spend more of their free time hanging out and taking tea at the shopping centre, something they would not have done just a few years earlier.

This was the dawn of an era that paved the way for today's enthusiastic coffee culture.

### Directions

From the fountain walk along Market Way and take first right towards the market. Stand outside the market.

## 05 Coventry Market

A single storey building and car park might not seem revolutionary today, but for the residents of 1950s Coventry, this was almost certainly the first time they had seen anything like this!

Planners in Coventry were pushing the boundaries of what a modern city could look like. Concrete and steel were used to create a structure able to support not only a shopping zone but also a car park. In these more mobile times, parking spaces became as important as the shopping centre they sit above.

Have a look inside. While it may look like a rather stark piece of 1950s architecture this is actually a listed building because of how innovative it was at the time!

Outside the market, the vast bulk of IKEA to the rear reminds us how shopping has changed again. In contrast to the small locally-owned shops of the 1950s, many retailers are now based on large units, often with their own dedicated parking. Their multi-national range of products is globally sourced and supported by national advertising, in contrast to the family businesses and manufacturing that Coventry used to house.

These large-scale operations struggle to fit into the shopping centres built decades ago and today it is a continual challenge for cities to find space for them in the centre, Generally they are located out-of-town, encouraging both the unsustainable use of private cars, and the decline of city centres. Having IKEA right here is therefore unusual by today's standards, but this popular store is no doubt a very welcome boost to the city centre's economy!

Coventry's ancient, war-time and modern histories have all played a part in how it looks and feels today. Incredible

landmarks of bygone eras and catastrophic atrocities give way to a 1950's cityscape, built out of necessity and with an eye to the future. But this is not the end of the story. Shopping and tastes are continually changing and the challenge for the city will be finding ways to accommodate them.

Come back in future years and you may well find a yet another face to Coventry!

#### Directions

Retrace your steps to return to the start point

 **Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**



#### Thank you to...

Martin Haslett for creating and photographing the trail

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